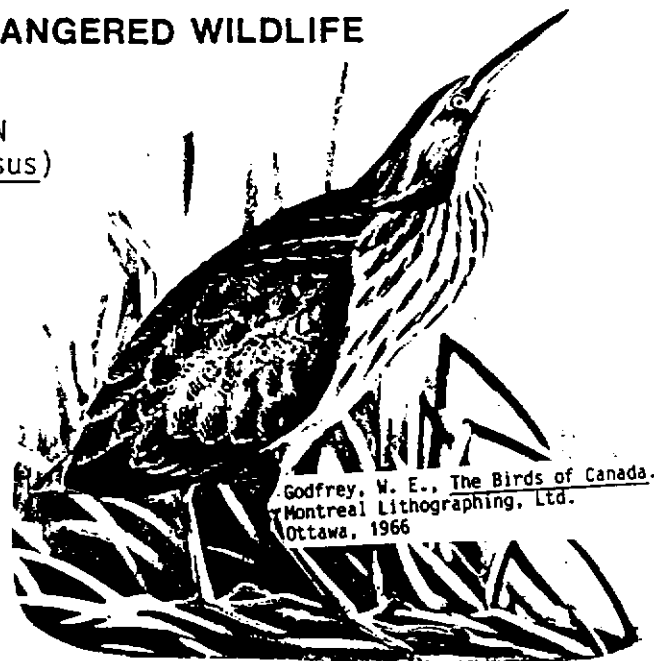


## MASSACHUSETTS RARE AND ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

### AMERICAN BITTERN (*Botaurus lentiginosus*)

#### DESCRIPTION

The American Bittern is a medium-sized (23-34 in, 58-86 cm long) brown, streaked, ground-dwelling heron which spends most of its time hidden among marshland vegetation. Its upper parts are mottled with brown and buff, while the underparts are streaked with brown and white. The short thick neck has a black stripe or patch on each side, and the throat is white with thick black streaks. The top of the head is usually darker than the body, or sometimes rusty. There is a buffy stripe over each of the yellow eyes. The bill, legs and feet are pale yellow or yellowish-green. Wingspread is from 32 to 50 in (80-106 cm) and the black wing tips are conspicuous in flight. The relatively short tail is rounded and mottled brown.



#### SIMILAR SPECIES

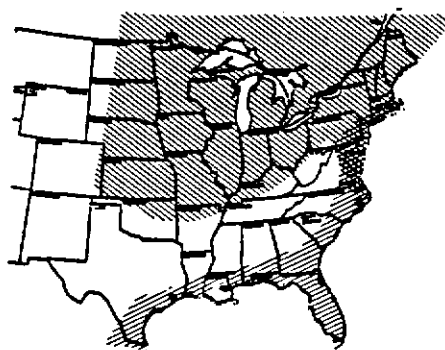
Immature Night Herons are grayer and more spotted than the American Bittern and frequently perch in trees. The Least Bittern is smaller with buffy wing patches.

#### HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS

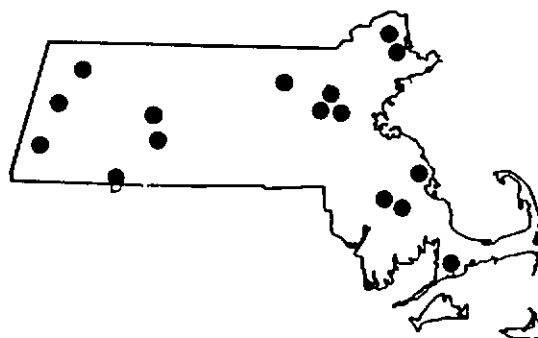
The American Bittern inhabits freshwater wetlands dominated by tall marsh plants such as cattails, bulrushes, sedges and grasses. It may also occur in brackish wetlands.

#### BEHAVIOR

The American Bittern spends most of its time hidden among marshland vegetation. It walks slowly and stealthily. When startled, the bittern assumes what is perhaps its most characteristic stance:



(continued overleaf)



#### Distribution of *Botaurus lentiginosus*

■ Breeding range    ■ Winter range

● Verified since 1978  
○ Reported prior to 1978

Breeding Distribution in Massachusetts  
by Town

standing frozen with the bill pointed skywards, wings contracted to the body in order to camouflage itself among the reeds, occasionally swaying from side to side with the vegetation as if blown by the wind. When flushed from a marsh, it gives a "kok kok kok" call or a nasal "haink", its wings flap loosely, feet dangle and it flies off slowly, but with rapid wing beats. The distinctive call is loud and guttural; the notes sound like an old-fashioned pump, usually in three syllables, the middle one sharply accented; "oonk-a-lunk" or "oong-ka-chook". Pumping calls are usually heard at dusk, but may be heard until midnight or at dawn in spring or early summer.

#### MATING/BREEDING HABITS

Courtship behavior is not well understood, but is known to include aerial and ground chases. Males slowly stalk females as they display a pair of white fanlike plumes raised over the back and shoulders. Usually, bitterns nest in marshes, but have been known to select dense, grassy upland fields if water is nearby. Males appear to be territorial throughout the breeding season, and remain in the nest-site vicinity. Males may be polygynous. The female builds the nest and cares for the young. The nest, about a foot (30 cm) in diameter, is located either on the ground in dense vegetation or on a platform about a foot above the water. Nest material includes dead reeds, cattails, grasses, and sedges. The 3 to 5 buff-brown to olive-brown eggs are laid at 1 day intervals with incubation beginning with the laying of the first egg. An egg hatches about 24 days after it was laid. Young are fed by regurgitation at the nest for about 2 weeks. The female continues to tend the young for an undetermined length of time after they leave the nest. There is one clutch per year.

#### FEEDING HABITS

Preferred foods include frogs, small snakes and eels, salamanders, crayfish, fish, and occasionally mice and grasshoppers caught on visits to open fields. The bittern feeds in marshes, meadows, and along edges of shallow ponds, standing motionless with neck outstretched and level bill, eyes focused down into the water, slowly aiming its bill before suddenly darting down-ward to seize the prey. It forages most commonly at dusk and dawn.

#### RANGE

The breeding range of the American Bittern extends from Newfoundland west to Manitoba and British Columbia; south to Maryland and west through Oklahoma and Kansas to southern California. This bittern also breeds very rarely in the Gulf states. It winters from the Carolinas south to the Bahamas, Cuba and Panama, and occasionally as far north along the east coast as Massachusetts. American Bitterns return to Massachusetts marshes in the second half of April through early May.

#### POPULATION STATUS

In Massachusetts the American Bittern is classified as a species of "Special Concern". Since 1978, 19 American Bittern sites have been documented. Disturbance and destruction of wetland habitat are the major causes for shrinking American Bittern populations in the state.